

## **It's not how you say it by Jancys-Blue-Bayou**

**Category:** Stranger Things, 2016

**Genre:** Drama, Romance

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Carol, Jonathan B., Nancy W., Tommy

**Pairings:** Jonathan B./Nancy W.

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2018-03-15 14:24:49

**Updated:** 2018-08-24 08:34:19

**Packaged:** 2019-12-12 22:38:08

**Rating:** T

**Chapters:** 2

**Words:** 11,067

**Publisher:** [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

**Summary:** Slight AU where Jonathan suffers from a stutter which infuriates him, but Nancy doesn't care and just supports him.

# 1. Chapter 1

A/N: This is from a prompt requesting a slight AU where Jonathan has a stutter which infuriates him but Nancy supports him and helps him deal with it.

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His mom always smiled reassuringly and said it was okay. His dad always smacked him over the head and called him an idiot. Everyone at school said the same. Except for one person. And she was currently sitting next to him in the front seat of his car, smiling at him and saying that it doesn't matter. Last week they had exposed Hawkins Lab and exorcised a monster out of Will. And slept together. So. He liked Nancy, had always liked her. More than liked her for over a year now. But he still couldn't wrap his head around the fact that she seemed to actually like him too. He had kind of chalked it all up to the craziness of that week, that Nancy liked to team up with him for monster hunting but as the insanity of the week passed she would realize that in everyday life she didn't need him. The stuttering idiot pervert. He still felt bad about the hit her reputation had taken last fall when rumor had spread that Nancy Wheeler, smart, beautiful, perfect Nancy Wheeler had slept with the town freak. He worried if word had gotten out now that they've actually had done it. He hadn't been back to school, staying home to care for Will and his mom for a few days before his mom insisted that he had to go back to. He didn't believe in faith so he chalked it up to just a pretty big coincidence that Nancy called the same evening. His mom answered the phone as usual, he hated answering the phone, only did it if he had to when no one else was home. When his mom smiled at him, held out the receiver and told him it was Nancy, he gulped and tried to ready himself, he stuttered even more over the phone. Nancy had shown more patience with him than what he thought was humanly possible, but still. His mom patted his shoulder as he took the receiver and prepared himself to be let down easy by her.

"H-hello."

"Hi!" She greeted happily. Like, really genuinely happy which surprised him. "How are you?" She then asks.

"Uh, g-good."

"Good. How's Will? And your mom?"

"They're b-better n-n-now, thanks," he answers and curses himself. He can't control it but still berates himself for not being able to.

"Glad to hear that."

"H-how are you?" He thinks to ask.

"Better now, it's good to hear your voice. I've missed you."

He's a bit floored by that, and again by how genuine she sounds. He at least thinks he's gotten pretty okay at reading her by now, and Nancy doesn't bullshit him.

"I've m-m-missed you too," he answers. Because he has, it's kind of insane how much he has. Between caring for Will, helping his mom and psyching himself out about Nancy's inevitable reaction to going back to real, everyday life, he had moments where he just smiled like an idiot thinking about her, about last week. The good parts of last week.

"When will you be back in school?" She asks.

"Oh, to-tomorrow a-actually."

"Oh, great! Would you mind picking me up?"

Even considering how the phone call had gone so far her request surprises him. So much so that he forgets to answer.

"Jonathan? Are you still there?"

"Oh!" He's shaken out of his daze. "Y-yes."

"So can you pick me up?"

"Oh, s-s-s-ure."

"Cool! See you tomorrow then!"

"Y-yes."

"Say hi to Will for me, bye!"

"B-bye."

And now here they were, sat in his car at the far end of the Hawkins High's parking lot. Nancy had smiled wide at him when she got in and kissed his cheek, then made small talk with him the whole way here. It was a bit easier for him to talk face to face instead of over the phone, and even though he was nervous around her it was somehow also comfortable, which made his stutter slightly less prominent. Or well, it was always prominent. But after his mom and Will, Nancy was definitely number three on the list of people around which he stuttered the least. Meaning he didn't stutter all the time over every word like it was with other people. She made him so comfortable he even just confessed that he thought she called him last night to let him know she didn't want to be seen with him in public. She had scrunched up her nose, looking incredulous at him and wondered why she would do that. So he'd spoken frankly what he thought, what certainly everyone else would think: Why would she want to be with stuttering idiot pervert? So then she had sighed and told him, not for the first time actually, that his stutter didn't matter.

"Who cares how you say things? The important thing is what you say. And you always say the right thing."

Once again he doesn't know what to say. She just smiles and takes his hand.

"Seriously, Jonathan. Who cares what people think? You're smarter than everyone else in there," she continues, nodding her head towards the school building. "They don't stutter but everything they say is just complete crap. Why would I want to be with anyone else but you?"

"I um-" He begins, hesitating since he still don't really know what to say. Nancy does, though.

"Do you want to be with me?" She challenges.

"Yes!" He answers right away.

"Good! That's what matters," she says and kisses him on the lips.

"Plus, I think it's gotten better. The stutter, I mean," she smiles when they break apart.

"On-only a-around you," he informs her, blushing.

She beams at him.

"Let's go."

They get out of the car and he's walking hand in hand with Nancy Wheeler into Hawkins High. Everyone stares at them and whisper amongst themselves, but Nancy just smiles at him. Anyone who dares meet her gaze she stares down. When they get to her locker his gaze lingers at the various slurs that now adorn it, "CHEATING SLUT" and "WHORE" scribbled in red marker on it. She opens it like it's nothing and gets her books. When she closes it again she catches him looking at it.

"I don't care, they're idiots. It's probably something on yours too, though," she shrugs.

"There's a-always something on mine," he notes.

They walk to his locker further down the corridor and yes, apart from the usual "P-P-PERV" written on it (they think they're sooo clever, imitating his stutter) it now also says "H-H-HOW W-W-W-WAS T-T-THE P-P-PITYFUCK?". He's almost impressed by the effort, in a way.

"Assholes," Nancy mutters. He gets his books out and they head to Social Studies together.

They bump into Steve in the hallway after Social Studies, which is pretty awkward, for all three of them. They ask Steve how he's doing, since the facial wounds are still visible. Steve says he's fine and asks in turn how Will's doing. Will's doing good, he answers and that's that. Then the two of them are standing by Nancy's locker minding their own business when a voice calls out.

"Aw look at this, the Slutty Princes and the Pervy Idiot are finally reunited! It warms my heart," Carol walks up to them with a smirk on her face and Tommy H. and all her mindless followers with her.

"Nice to see you too, Carol," Nancy deadpans.

"So B-B-B-Byers man, how was it? Finally getting some a-a-a-action?" Tommy H. asks, the usual shit-eating grin on his face while he mocks his stutter.

"Yeah, did he sweep you off your feet or was it straight to the m-m-m-motel?" Carol adds, mirroring her boyfriend's grin. He wishes the ground would just open up beneath him and swallow him down.

"It was great actually. We did it twice. I begged, just couldn't get enough of him," Nancy says matter-of-factly. He's not the only one who's jaw drops, everyone clearly not expecting her to react that way. Least of all him. It's um, it's true, that they did it twice that night. He just didn't expect her to say it, to other people... not that he minds it, especially since it shut them up.

"How is it for you guys, Carol? Tommy still satisfying you? Or is it hard to keep the spark alive? Is that why you're so invested in other people's business, is it more fun than your own?" Nancy keeps going with a straight face when no one else says anything. He's never seen Carol lost for words before. He could get used to it.

"Bitch," Carol finally mutters, looking at Nancy in disbelief.

"Creative," Nancy deadpans. "Well, it's been lovely chatting with you but we have to get to class," she continues and takes his hand before pushing their way past Carol and Tommy and their cronies.

She looks up at him with a knowing smirk while they walk away. He just looks at her in awe. Right when he thought he couldn't find her any more attractive than he already did.

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When it's Friday they go out on a date. A real date, dinner and a movie. Not at some fancy restaurant of course, just at a diner since that's what they can afford. He's pretty sure he wouldn't like the

fancier places anyway, and Nancy says the same. It's going really well, she ordered for both of them so he didn't have to, they got a relatively secluded booth too and conversation flows freely, Nancy is so easy to talk to. Now she just prompted to list his three Desert Islands Discs, if he could choose only three albums to listen to for the rest of his life, which would they be? He starts off with *Unknown Pleasures* because that's a given.

"A-nd it'll have to b-be something with The Clash too," he continues.

"*London Calling*?" She suggests.

"Hm, n-no I think I like their f-first album more actually."

"Okay, and the last one?"

"Well it has to be Bowie, o-obviously."

"Figured, but which one?"

"Uh... Z-Ziggy Stardust. Or wait m-maybe something from the Berlin tri-trilogy. *"Heroes"* m-maybe? Or *Low*. N-no I can't decide."

"Come on, pick one," she smirks at him, amused by how much thought goes into it.

"Ziggy."

"Cool. Hey can you explain something to me? What's the deal with that Berlin era? I'm not sure I get it, I mean I like *"Heroes"*, the song but."

"Well it's about him re-reinventing himself c-constantly. Not just the image b-but musically like-like-" he gets stuck in the middle of his sentence, not being able to get past the word, choking on it. Goddamnit he hates when that happens. It's like it's totally blocked, he knows what to say but can't get it out. He's an idiot.

Nancy smiles patiently at takes his hand, stroking her fingers against the back of it.

"It's okay," she says quietly. "Just take a breath."

He does and she keeps smiling at him.

"And it's like?" She prompts him to continue, helping him past the blockage.

"He wanted s-something different again like w-when he went from s-sort of softer stuff in the b-beginning to more rock, and t-then he invented the who-whole Ziggy Stardust persona after he met like Iggy P-Pop and Lou Reed and a bunch of rock stars. A-and then it was like The Thin White Duke with *Station t-to Station* y'know? T-that was kind of weird because he was on so much c-coke. S-so then he went to Berlin to do something n-new again and Brian Eno, uh the pro-producer helped with t-this new sound and like *Low* is a bit w-weird and ex-ex-experimental but I like it, it's sort of s-slow in a way and darker. And you can kind of h-hear like h-how he's on his way to "*Heroes*" and *Lodger*," he takes a deep breath as he finishes. He's a bit embarrassed about how he just droned on about Bowie but Nancy just smiles and looked interested the whole way through.

"That's cool. What do you think of his latest stuff?" She asks.

"O-okay... bit too c-commercial."

"Of course you think that," she smirks and rolls her eyes. "Pretentious," she teases him.

"Chart slave," he teases right back.

After dinner and the movie she asks him if he's got anything with Bowie in the car and he digs out a tape. Then she ever so casually asks if he has to go straight home. When he answers no she says neither does she. Then she off-handedly mentions Lover's Lake. Mmhm. They park the car in the much-rumored spot and switch to the backseat. He'll never be over this, her. It's as great as the first time...s. He likes it. Obviously. But like, also in the sense that it's an activity where he doesn't have to talk. Where it's about action, not words. He's better with actions than words, he thinks. Not to toot his own horn, but.

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So life is suddenly wonderful, because Will is doing better every day



and Nancy is with him and she is amazing in every single way. They do everything together. He picks her up in the morning for school, where they share most classes and have lunch together on the hood of his car or in the darkroom. When school's out they usually hang around at his or her house, talking, laughing, listening to music, doing homework, doing... other things. Well okay, there's two major clouds in the sky, and one minor. Bob is dead and he feels bad about not having been more welcoming to him. He tries to help his mom in every way he can. He helps her deal with the funeral and all. And then there's Barb's funeral. Nancy tries to be stoic about it, says she's prepared for it for a long time. But she confides in him about all her feelings about Barb's death, the night before the funeral. He simply holds her in his arms and listens as she cries her heart out, seemingly letting out a year's worth of pent up grief in one evening. He tells her it's okay, reassures that it's not her fault and he seems to eventually get through to her. She has hard time at the funeral too, seeing Mr. and Mrs. Holland and the still fresh grief in them. She leans on him and he just tries to help her get through the day. And the next. On the third day she starts to get back to her normal, confident, fun, smart, sassy self.

The minor cloud (only in comparison with the other two since they involved actual death) over him is that Mrs. Weekes has them doing a book report for English class. Which in itself is fine, he's got *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller and he likes the book a lot, he's already done with it. But it's an oral presentation. Which means he has to speak in front of the whole class and Mrs. Weekes. He'd rather take another Demogorgon attack over that.

"It's going to be fine!" Nancy looks up from her intense note-taking of *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath. He looks at her and comes to a stop with his foot which he now realizes he had been shaking in stress.

"I'll die," he mutters.

"No you won't. I've told you, it's really gotten better," she insists. He shakes his head. It's gotten better around her because she makes him comfortable. But even then it's not good. He has good days and bad days as always.

"I c-can't talk in front of that many people. You've s-seen me."

She has. He relives all the past instances of when he's been forced to do oral presentations. Everyone snickering while he'd stumbled and stuttered his way through. Well, everyone but Nancy. And Barb. They never laughed at him.

"I can help you," she says.

"How?"

"Well, we'll practice," she says like it's the most obvious thing in the world.

"It s-still won't b-be good," he mutters.

"Yes it will! Come on. First let's work on what you'll say."

He's already got his notes and she helps him, asking him questions about the book which prompts him into further thoughts about it and she helps him structure it on paper. When they're done she prompts him to stand up and give it a practice run. He obliges, rising from her bed with his notebook and tries to run through it. She sits perched on the bed, legs criss-crossed and listens attentively as he stutters and stumbles over words and gets lost in the notes until he just stops with a frustrated sigh in the middle of a sentence.

"Hey, it wasn't that bad," she insists.

"Yes it was," he groans.

"Just relax, it'll get better. Hey, I've got an idea," she says and gets up off the bed. She goes over to her desk and takes out blank paper and scissors, promptly cutting the paper up into squares.

"You should have the text on cards instead, it'll be easier to find your place again if you get lost," she explains when she returns to the bed with the paper squares.

"That's smart," he notes. Why hasn't he thought of that before?

"I know," she smiles.

She helps him write out his presentation on the cards instead and

tells him to try again.

He stutters and stumbles as much as before and loses his place a couple of times but finds it again quickly so the cards work at least, and he gets through to the end.

"See, already better."

"It's still bad."

For a second she sits in silence, thinking.

"You should try slowing down."

"Hm?"

"It's like you kind of speed up sometimes, like you're in a hurry and then you trip over the words. Right?"

"Y-yeah, b-but sometimes it's like... like-like I just c-can't get the word out," he tries to describe it. That was the worst feeling, when he knew what to say, knew the words but just couldn't get them out, like in the diner a couple of weeks ago.

"I understand. So maybe try and slow down a bit, like focus on pronouncing each syllable. It's no hurry."

He nods.

He tries again, tries to slow down. He feels like an idiot, like he's almost sounding out each syllable but Nancy just nods encouragingly. It takes longer, but he gets through to the end and with a bit less stuttering. Nancy praises him and has him do it again at the same pace. It goes a little better. One more time, she insists and this time he feels a bit more confident and automatically increases the pace a little – but still holds the stuttering to the slightly lower amount of the two previous times.

"Great! See, you will be good," she smiles.

"Feels l-like I'm going so slow," he says.

"You're doing fine!"

"I think I-I'll still lose m-my cool when I'm up there. I'll just sp-speed up anyway."

Nancy is quiet again, thinking.

"We can try something else, for the rhythm."

"What?"

"Music."

"What do you mean?" He asks, confused.

"You've got rhythm. When you listen to music it's like you're... yeah you're in rhythm, you know. Don't you feel it too? Like, more comfortable kind of?"

"Yeah," he answers after thinking for a second, realizing that she's right. As always.

"Let's go to your place," she says and promptly gets up off the bed.

Nancy tells him to play something he loves and try again so he puts on *Unknown Pleasures* at a low volume and starts again. But he finds himself speeding up to much in time with Peter Hook's awesome basslines so he turns it off and tries with *Low* instead, hoping David Bowie's Berlin period will once again come to his aid.

It suits the purpose better. Or well, not at first but when he flips to the more ambient b-side of the record he finds that the base and rhythm syncs better with his speech. He reminds himself to focus on each syllable and taps his fingers against the cards in time with *Warszawa* and then *Art Decade*.

"That was the best one yet!" Nancy exclaims as he finishes almost at the same time as *Art Decade* thus too.

"Y-yeah, it felt good."

"Try one more," she encourages.

*Weeping Wall* goes a bit too fast which screws him up, but *Subterraneans* works better.

"That was great!"

He nods in agreement. It's still far from perfect, but it's definitely a lot better than before.

"Only p-problem is I can't play music in class," he notes, sitting down next to her on his bed.

"Well, the point is to get you relaxed and confident in the words. And I think you should make a tape of the songs that worked best so we can practice to it more. We can play it in the car too, listen to it on the day. Then hopefully something will be stuck in your head and maybe that'll help," she lays out her strategy.

"Maybe," he contends before kissing her. "Thanks."

"No problem."

They practice it almost daily for a whole week, holed up in his room with music playing and Nancy perched on the bed listening intently while he stands up and fumbles his way through time and time again. Once or twice he allows his mom and Will to listen to it too and they sit with Nancy on the bed and just like her assures him that he's doing good. When the day of the presentations finally arrive they listen to the tape in his car on the way to school and then he pops it out and puts it in his Walkman which he brought with him. They've got English after lunch so during lunch he first listens to *Warszawa* and *Art Decade* basically on repeat and runs through it again. Nancy listens and showers him with praise, insisting that it's really great now. He almost believes her but he's still nervous as hell. She can tell and tries to calm his nerves with her touch, cupping his face gently and kissing him before whispering more words of encouragement in his ear. When they walk to class she hums *Art Decade* the whole way to help implant it in his brain.

Mrs. Weekes, curse her, by a whim decides to let the presentations roll in reverse order, beginning with Scotty Young. It means that Nancy is one of the first to go up and give her presentation, and she's

flawless as always. She barely even looks at her notes. And it means he as a Byers must sit and wait for his turn, which means he has plenty of time for his nervousness to build up even more. He glances intermittently at Nancy who sits at the desk to his left as usual, and she always smiles reassuringly back at him. He runs the words through his head over and over and taps out *Art Decade* with his foot but he screws up time and time again he feels. When it's getting close to being his turn Nancy subtly passes him a note of encouragement, saying that he'll do awesome followed by a bunch of hearts. He looks at her and tries to look convinced but she doesn't buy it. Soon he receives another note simply reading "SERIOUSLY AWESOME!" and looks at him determined, which makes him almost laugh and he relaxes a bit.

He goes up to the front of the class, drumming *Art Decade* with his fingers against the cards. He looks out over the class and swallows hard. His heart is beating out of his chest. He looks over at Nancy who smiles at him. He clears his throat and begins.

And it goes... okay? Maybe even good, almost? He just looks at Nancy throughout which has a calming effect on him, she keeps smiling and even mouths along with him a little, because of course she knows his presentation just as well as he does by now. He kind of keeps a rhythm and doesn't get lost at all. He stutters, but not nearly as much as he usually does in these situations. When he goes back to his seat Nancy smiles and reaches out and squeezes his hand, giving over a new note in the process. "I TOLD YOU, IT WAS GREAT!" it reads, followed by even more hearts than before.

Mrs. Weekes gives him an A and praises his progress, asking if he'd done something different. After he's recovered from the shock of getting an A for an oral assignment for the first time ever, he says that Nancy helped him practice. Mrs. Weekes just smiles and nods and says he should keep doing whatever he's doing. When he tells Nancy about the grade she exclaims "I told you!" and kisses him before telling him she's so proud of him and that they should celebrate. He points out that she got an A+ which she brushes off saying that he really deserved it more than her. He disagrees so she suggests a compromise, saying that they both should've gotten the plus. He agrees to that.

She insists they go to the diner downtown and orders milkshakes and then blueberry pancakes because she knows it's his favorite. The diner is close to Melvald's so Nancy then gets it in her head that they should go over there and tell his mom. He's really not behind the idea since it feels childish to run to his mom just because he got an A. He's gotten A's before, just not for this. But Nancy insists and drags him into the store and right to checkout where his mom is working. She looks up at them and Nancy giddily informs her about his grade. His mom is embarrassingly happy for him, standing up and exclaiming how proud she is and hugging both him and Nancy and gushes over him and he goes completely crimson because there's other people there who just looks confused or bemused or annoyed at the sudden delay in checkout. The guy next in line clears his throat and looks to say something but quiets instantly when both his mom and Nancy glares at him.

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Nancy insists that it doesn't bother her, but it bothers him, how the asshole people that populate the school treat her. He doesn't give a damn what they say about him, but he cares a whole lot what they say about Nancy. She doesn't deserve any of it. In a perfect world Nancy telling Carol off in the glorious way she did that first day he was back would've shut them all up for good but sadly that's not how it works in real life, only in movies. In real life Carol and Tommy and all the rest keep coming up with snide remarks when they pass them in the halls, keep scribbling stuff on their lockers. Keep saying things under their breath.

"Slut, Pervert," Carol says shortly and nods to them one day when they pass her and her whole clique in the hallway.

They just ignore her, like they've agreed to do, and walk on. But then Carol calls out again.

"Hey Princess, don't you miss her... what was her name? You know, Four-Eyes?"

Nancy halts her step and he feels her squeeze his hand hard, trying to keep her cool. She looks furious. She swallows hard, takes a deep breath and then resumes walking, obviously working hard to ignore the loudmouth.

"Let's just go," she whispers.

But no, he's had it. He lets go of Nancy's hand and promptly turn around and marches back to Carol, Tommy and everyone else. Their smug faces look at him with amusement. He doesn't reflect on that, instead just launching into the tirade he didn't realize he had on his chest.

"You know, you guys are the most pathetic bunch of idiots I've ever seen. You just walk around shitting on other people all day because deep down you know that the only thing you've got going for yourself is your status here in high school and you're scared because that's soon over!" He directs at Carol. "And you, even if you're a fucking idiot even you must know that you're nothing without her or your place as a starter on the crappiest high school basketball team in the state," he continues, glaring at Tommy. "And you guys are nothing at all without them even," he directs to their mindless followers. "Hope you are enjoying this time because it will be the best years of your life! You'll never get out of this crapsack town, you'll just turn into your boring-ass parents and get stuck here, while she," he gestures back towards Nancy, "She will be somewhere else, anywhere she wants to be, doing whatever she wants because she's fucking amazing!" He finishes.

They all just stare at him, mouths slightly agape. He turns on his heel and walks back to Nancy who also stares at him. But when he reaches her she promptly shoves him up against the nearest locker and kisses him with the same fervor as that first night at Murray's. He's almost taken aback but quickly finds himself in the situation, holding her close and kissing her back just as eagerly. Then he thinks he can hear footsteps walking away in the distance but he's really not focusing on that right now.

"You didn't stutter," Nancy gets out when they break apart for air. She kisses him again before he has a chance to answer. He didn't even realize it but it's true. He's not sure what happened there, he didn't even think.

If it weren't for Mr. Dowd, the geography teacher, banging on the row of lockers a couple of minutes later to get them to break it up he's not sure if they would've ever stopped despite the fact that they



were in the middle of the second floor hallway in school at 2 pm on a Tuesday and despite the fact that he normally prefers to keep affections in private.

"I love you," he says. He's sure of it. So he says it right there and then.

Nancy looks at him for a split-second, her eyes beaming and lips curving upwards and then she kisses him again. Right in front of Mr. Dowd and it seals the deal for detention for the both of them but it's totally worth it.

Because he's pretty sure of what her response meant.

And he didn't stutter.

## 2. Chapter 2

"Ready for this?" She asks him on the porch to her house.

"Your dad will kill me," Jonathan deadpans.

"No he won't. He'd have to go through me first. And mom, frankly. And Holly. Maybe even Mike," she smiles back.

He's still nervous around her family, mostly her dad, even though they've been together for over a year now. She can't blame him, really. She thinks of her dad as harmless and to be honest a pretty useless jaded guy with seemingly only a passing interest in his children's lives. But she gets that his suffocating silence, stony gaze and dry tone puts Jonathan on edge. He's sure her dad hates him, she herself wouldn't go that far but it's hard for her to deny that he at least doesn't care much for Jonathan. She doesn't get why, since Jonathan is the best. But then again her dad is the most boring person she knows so maybe it's natural he doesn't like the funniest. But to be honest maybe Jonathan's right in his suspicions that it's because of his stutter ("he thinks I'm an idiot") and/or that he's "too poor and not good enough for you".

"Plus, he'll hear about me being accepted by Columbia first. That's gotta put even him in a good mood, his eldest being accepted into a great school," she continues.

"S-sure, but then your mom will ask me and I'll tell t-them about NYU and then we'll have to tell them about our plans of l-living together in sin and that's where I see this going south," he continues in his slightly sarcastic tone.

"Listen to me," she begins and puts her hands on either side of his face, drawing him in close. "Demogorgon. Mind Flayer. My father. We've battled well against two, I think we can take the third too."

That draws a chuckle which is all she wanted. She gives him a kiss before they head inside.

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"Oh honey I'm so proud of you!" Her mom positively beams over the dinner table. "That is wonderful! Congratulations!"

"Thank you," she smiles.

"Yes, congratulations honey," her dad says. With... well his voice is at least not completely devoid of emotion for once. "What happened to Northwestern? Or IU?" He then asks in his 'neutral' tone which is really not neutral, she knows by now.

"Northwestern was just a backup, Columbia was my first choice. And I didn't apply to IU," she calmly explains.

"Hm. Nothing wrong with IU. I went there, you know."

"I know, I never said there were? I wanted to go to Columbia, and I got in!"

"Yes, that's great."

"It is great! So great," her mom chimes in. "We're so proud of you honey."

"Yeah, congrats I guess," Mike butts in using his patented I-don't-really-care-that-much tone.

"Thanks," she says again.

"Oh Jonathan, how about you then? Heard anything?" Her mom turns to Jonathan with a smile. She grabs his hand under the table for support.

"Oh, y-yes actually. I g-got into NYU," he answers with a polite smile.

"Oh congratulations! That's great! Oh Joyce must be so proud, as she should be!"

"She is," Jonathan smiles.

"So, Tisch?" Mike asks.

"Yeah."

"Cool. Congrats."

"T-thanks."

"Well, congratulations," her father says, curtly.

"T-thank y-you," Jonathan politely answers and she gives his hand a comforting squeeze.

"So, New York," her father continues in a short tone.

"Yes," she answers. "We'll both be in New York, isn't it great?" She throws out there, gauging the reaction.

"Of course it is," her mom smiles. Her dad just gives off a grunt.

"We think we're gonna try and find an apartment together, off-campus. Cheaper, plus we'd just constantly be in each other's dorm anyway," she ploughs on now that she's started. She can feel Jonathan grow more nervous. For real, his knee's touching her knee and he's tapping his foot like he does when he's anxious, she can feel.

"That sounds lovely," her mom continues to be enthusiastic, which is no surprise. She adores Jonathan. Her dad just grunts in response again but then opens his mouth.

"You know, you shouldn't pick your college just because of a boy."

"What? I'm not!" She's flabbergasted by his take.

"Really? Seems to me there's a lot colleges you could go to, but you're set on the one that happens to be in the same city as his."

"Now, Ted..." her mom admonishes.

"T-that's n-not h-how it h-happened," Jonathan says, nervously but right to her dad's face. His stutter has really become much better in the last year, but it becomes prominent when people make him nervous or anxious.

"I'm going to Columbia because I want to become a journalist and they're the best at that! Don't you listen?"

"Hm. Just seems like you've already made all these plans together. Hm. Just saying, high school romances are all well and good but they don't usually last now do they?" Her dad bluntly continues and she's exasperated.

"W-with all d-due r-respect Mr. Wheeler," Jonathan starts instead, and ignores all eyes, including her dad's condescending gaze, falling on him and powers forward. "T-that's a p-pretty stupid n-notion."

"Excuse me?" Her dad challenges and glares at Jonathan.

"N-nance is g-gonna be the b-best j-jou-journalist in the w-world and that's why she's g-going to C-columbia. She told you s-so. She d-didn't pick it for me."

Her dad scoffs condescendingly at Jonathan's stutter. She has to hold herself back from going at him for it. It infuriates her. But Jonathan ignores it and just continues.

"A-a-and... I l-love Nancy and t-this," he gestures between them, "i-isn't just a high school th-thing and i-it wouldn't end just b-because of d-dis-dis-..." he's heated and gets stuck on the word so she squeezes his hand again and jumps in before her father can with more condescending bullshit.

"Distance, it wouldn't matter if we went to college in different cities, I love Jonathan and he loves me and that's what matters and thankfully it just so happens that our dreams happen to match up nicely like this which is great, why can't you just be happy for us?!"

Her dad has no response to that. She's had it, she's done with this. She gets up from the table and Jonathan follows. With his hand clutched in hers she marches out to the hall with him right behind her. They can hear her mom giving her dad some choice words and then come their way. They halt in the doorway.

"Oh you don't have to leave like this," her mom pleads.

"Please mom, I just can't with him tonight," she pleads in response.

"Oh well. You guys go, enjoy your evening. Ugh, I can't believe him sometimes. I'll talk to him. I'm so happy for you, both of you! And I

think living together sounds like a great idea!" Her mom responds.

"Thanks," she says.

"T-thanks. And thanks for d-dinner, it was delicious," Jonathan adds.

"Oh thank you," her mom smiles and pulls first Jonathan and then her into hugs.

"Thanks for standing up for me," she tells him when they're alone outside, walking in the nice spring evening.

"You'd have done it yourself I just c-couldn't help myself. Your dad can be a real idiot," he replies, stutter less noticeable now when it's just the two of them.

"I know. But anyway, thanks. And screw him, doesn't matter what he thinks. What matters is this, she tells him and gestures between them like he did earlier.

"Right," he says and presses a kiss to her temple.

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*Four years later...*

"S-sometimes, people don't say what they're r-really thinking."

Jonathan takes a pause after saying it and looks right at her. She smiles and nods to him. They've worked on the speech for weeks. He's worked on the exhibition for months. The nod means good start and good length on the dramatic pause, continue now.

"Capture the right m-moment, it says more."

He's so amazing. So talented, so hardworking. He graduated top of his class from Tisch this spring. He couldn't decide between artistic or journalistic photography – so the genius built a course-load consisting of both and aced all of it. And now... boy have the two of them both been on a roll these last few months. Especially him. They both graduated this summer. With honors. He'd already been headhunted by this art gallery to do this autumn exhibition even before graduation. And one day in the summer she came home to their

apartment to tell him she had applied for a position as junior staff writer at the New York Times. Amazingly, he had smiled his crooked smile and told her he'd just gotten off the phone with one of his old professors who'd encouraged him to apply for the position of junior photographer because the professor could put a good word in. And did. And even more amazingly, they both got the jobs. They're a team, ready to take the world by storm. Ready to get to the truth of everything.

"Street photography is all about t-the moment."

They've both worked their asses off. Especially Jonathan, using his free time to work on the exhibition. But it's fun. They're both doing what they want to do. And they're together. He's capturing moments in time. But they're both in motion.

"I don't claim to know what p-people are thinking, or saying. I don't know if anyone of us knows. But I think photographs gives us a chance of working it out."

Ms. Lacroix who owns the gallery caught sight of Jonathan's photographs at a Tisch exhibit and it all started there. Now they're here, opening day. Jonathan came home to the apartment one day in a slight panic because "Ms. Lacroix wants me to 'say a few words' at the opening". All these years later public speaking still terrifies him, even though he's gotten so much better at it. Even though his stutter overall has gotten extremely better, it's barely even noticeable anymore when he's just speaking in normal every day situations. When it's just the two of them it's near non-existent because he's completely at ease with her. It's mostly noticeable when he's stressed or anxious. Such as when he's speaking in front of a group. She managed to calm him down. Pointed out that he's done this before, that he'll crush it and that she'll help him.

"I think these photographs says something about the people in them, about the streets they were taken on, about the city they were taken in. And maybe also about me who took them. I hope t-they say something to you too."

She told him that less is more really is a good strategy for speeches. She told him it was time to go back to basics, strip everything else

away. So they started off with what he told her in the red hue of the Hawkins High darkroom many years ago. And then took it from there.

"Thank you all for coming."

Nailed it. Short, simple and sweet. Letting his photos speak more. She enthusiastically claps like the rest of the room. Jonathan blushes slightly and humbly bows his head. He can't wait for the applause to stop so he can get off, she knows and smiles at him. Next to her Will and Joyce stand, just as enthusiastic as she is. Will is at Tisch himself now – though not in the photography department. Joyce came out to visit now for the exhibition. "I am not missing my eldest first big solo exhibition" as she told them. Joyce is beaming with pride. She's so proud of her boys. Nancy's heard from Holly that Joyce has had Jonathan's photographs and Will's artworks up by the register at Melvald's and has been telling anyone and everyone who will listen (or not even that) about "*her* Jonathan's big exhibition at a *gallery* in *New York*". She relayed this information to Jonathan who went completely crimson upon hearing it, while she thinks it's the sweetest thing ever.

The applause finally peters out as servers steps forth with trays filled with champagne glasses, and Jonathan gets to step down and heads straight towards them.

"You did awesome babe," she tells him as soon as he's reached them. "And congrats again, I'm so proud of you," she continues and gives him a quick kiss.

"Thanks," he answers as she naturally tucks herself into his side.

"Honey I'm so so proud of you," Joyce says and gives him a quick hug and kiss on the cheek.

"You've said that f-five times already today," Jonathan notes through a crooked smile.

"Well I am!" Joyce throws back.

"This is so cool!" Will exclaims. "All these people came here to see



your pictures!"

Jonathan bashfully looks down at the ground instead of up at the packed room full of people now milling around looking at his photographs, his art. She bumps his hip and beams at him when he looks at her. He mirrors her smile.

"Jonathan! Humble boy, that was great!" Ms. Lacroix calls out as she swoops down on them, beckoning a server with her and swiftly passing out champagne glasses to them all before taking one herself. The gallery owner is eccentric, unapologetic and a big fan of Jonathan, which makes Nancy a big fan of her.

"T-thanks, Nancy helped me," Jonathan answers.

"It was your words! You did awesome, there's a lot of people here just to see your photos, stop being so modest," she smiles at him and bumps his hip with hers again.

"Yes, it's a great turnout!" Ms. Lacroix agrees and looks around the room at the mumbling mess of people wandering around along the walls. "Compared to other opening nights this is great, good amount of people, good mix of people and hear that sound?" She continues and dramatically pauses. They all listen. They can't hear anything, just the murmur of the room as people look at Jonathan's photos, mumbles about them and talks among themselves.

"What? I just hear a lot of noise of people," Will is the one to say it.

"Yes but it's a good noise! Trust me, I'm a great judge of these noises. You don't want it to be too loud – that means people are talking amongst themselves more than looking at the art, but you don't want it too quiet either, that means people look at it and don't have anything to say about what they see. This is the perfect level. I can already tell you're gonna be hit, Jonathan!" Ms. Lacroix explains. Joyce looks even prouder.

"I don't know," Jonathan mumbles and looks down at his shoes. "Feels awkward to be s-standing here while everyone walks around looking at my photos," he continues. She puts her hand on his back, rubbing it in soothing circles. She gets that feeling. She could only wish to be

as Jonathan, but even if she was, she's not sure she'd be brave enough to display it to the world like this, displaying a part of yourself as the art is.

"Oh that's normal," Ms. Lacroix waves it off while reaching out to shake Joyce's and Will's hands. "Louise Lacroix, nice to meet you!"

"Joyce Byers, proud mother," Joyce beams.

"Will Byers, uh, proud brother," Will says.

"Will's an a-artist," Jonathan quickly says.

"No come on-" Will protests, as modest as his brother.

"Ooh, that's interesting! Are you based here too?" Ms. Lacroix asks.

"Uh, I guess, I go to Tisch..."

"Ah, you too? It's a great school. What's your preferred mode of expression? Do you paint, draw, sculpt, photograph...?"

"Uh, draw... and paint some."

"Wonderful! Do you-" Ms. Lacroix cuts herself off as she spies someone across the room. "Excuse me, lovely meeting you all and I'll see you all later but I just spotted Mr. Francis over there and he's loaded with cash and a friend of the gallery, I've got some schmoozing to do," she finishes and hurries off in the direction of some old guy in an expensive suit.

Friends and some of Jonathan's old professors take turns coming up to them to gush about the exhibition. Jonathan is continually flustered by all the praise, he's so modest and uncomfortable in the spotlight, and it makes his stutter a bit more noticeable. No one else seems to care, or even really notice it but she knows he himself is infuriated by it which just makes him stutter more. So she helps him in the way that's become second nature to her, to them when carrying conversations when he stutters. She takes some of the load off of him by finishing his sentences when she can tell he's about to get stuck on a word, she fills in gaps, butts in and adds on to his sentences, to give him time to breathe and collect himself. They've

found it's a good way to cope with it. They know each other so well they can finish each other's sentences all the time, usually she doesn't because she loves to hear him speak but in situations like this she does, to seamlessly alleviate him without anyone else thinking twice about it, she knows no one bats an eyelash at it, it's really not surprising to anyone that they are "one of those couples" as her friend Amanda once said.

Soon as she gets the chance though, when there's a brief lull in people coming up to talk to them, she leads Jonathan outside, to get some much needed fresh air. They sneak out the back and finally find themselves alone. He leans back against the brick wall and she can tell how he's instantly relaxed when it's just them, him and her. That makes her happy, will always make her happy.

"How's New York's best photographer doing?" She smiles softly and steps in close in front of him, fiddling with his shirt collar.

"Better now," he smiles down at her.

"This is a great night," she tells him.

"I know. It's just a-awkward to be in there with everyone coming up..."

"I know, I get that."

"I'm happy mom could come out."

"Me too. She's so proud of you."

"I know."

"I'm so proud of you," she tells him again.

"You've said that."

"I know, but I really really am. So proud. You've worked so hard, you've put your heart and soul into this. And it has turned out amazing, as I knew it would. You're great Jonathan. You're so talented, so hardworking and so brave. No, don't roll your eyes, I'm serious," she pokes him in the chest. "You are. And you need to know

how unique that is. To be this talented and combine it with your work ethic. There's lots of talented people, and there's lots of hardworking people. But it takes both to succeed and you have it both in bunches. And you're the bravest person I know. You're brave in every way. Obviously in the going face-to-face with a monster way."

"You did too," he interrupts, blushing.

"Don't interrupt, yes I did but whatever, we're both brave but this is about you. You're incredibly brave in that regard. But also in whole other ways too, like this. Displaying your photos, your art, displaying pieces of your soul like this. That's brave. I sure haven't done that. And on top of it you face your fears of public speaking and stand in front of the whole crowded room and speak from the heart. I know you don't like it when I go on like this about you and you always try to turn it around on me but I need you to get that you're amazing."

When she's finished he looks at her for a half-second. Then his lips are pressed against hers, his hands are pulling her in close and then go into her hair. She eagerly responds to the kiss, deepening it before they pull apart. He rests his forehead against hers.

"I love you," he tells her.

"I love you," she tells him.

"And fine. We must be an awesome couple then since you're even more amazing than"

She silences him with another kiss.

"Hush, can we call it a tie?" She smiles.

"Fine," he answers before capturing her lips again.

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*Six months later...*

Jonathan's been a bit odd lately. It's nothing major, she can't quite put her finger on it. When she asks him he says he's fine. It's just... he's been stuttering more around her than he's done for a long time.

As their relationship grew and he grew more confident in it he just became more relaxed around her and stuttered less and less. Because "You make me comfortable". He barely stutters at all anymore when it's just the two of them unless he's particularly stressed about something. But he says he's fine. And there's no reason for him to be particularly stressed now. Sure there's a lot going on at work but not like it's worse than last fall. But for the past week he's been stuttering like he hasn't done around her since high school really. But then again, maybe it's nothing. It's up and down with this stuff, sometimes he has a good day and sometimes a bad day and it's no big deal. It's just odd... usually doesn't last for a week like this.

Maybe it'll pass. It's Saturday morning and they both have the whole weekend off, maybe that's all he needs, to relax, she thinks as she stretches out in bed and rolls over to cuddle into him. Only to find emptiness beside her instead of the nice warm cuddle-bug she expected. Huh, he must already be up, she thinks and listens. Yep, she can hear him in the kitchen. She silently wishes for him to be standing there making pancakes right now. Jonathan and pancakes, that's all she needs this morning she feels. Yawning, she swings her legs over the edge and rises from the bed. She heads to the bathroom for a shower.

Stepping out of the shower she just throws on panties and one of Jonathan's t-shirts before venturing into the kitchen, she'll hear from him if he's thought of any special plans for today but as far as she's concerned she'd be content to just basically snuggle up with him on the couch the whole day.

She finds him in front of the stove, more properly dressed in pants and a shirt.

"Yes!" She calls out, startling him a little. He looks up. She points to the frying pan he's occupied with. "I was hoping for pancakes," she smiles. He breathes out and chuckles. "Hey," she continues, walking up to him and wrapping her arms around him from behind.

"H-hey," he responds. She leans up and kisses his cheek. "S-slept well?"

"Yeah, you?"

"Yeah," she answers while setting the table,

He stutters like before, she notes. Odd.

"W-what do you want t-to do today?" He asks.

"I don't know, what do you know want to do?" She answers while getting juice, maple syrup and jam from the fridge as he's finishing the last few pancakes.

"I t-thought maybe we could go for a walk, later? I d-don't feel like going out tonight. I was t-thinking I could c-cook instead?" He nervously suggests as he comes over with the stack of pancakes and sits down opposite her.

"Sounds great, I didn't feel like going out either. I just want you," she tells him.

"A-and pancakes," he smiles.

"True," she grins and digs in. "Luckily it's a package deal."

They sit and enjoy breakfast, enjoy each other's company. But his slightly odd behavior keeps gnawing at her.

"Hey, you okay?" She finally asks.

"Y-yeah, why?"

"You sure you're okay? You seem nervous."

"N-nervous? Why w-would I be?"

"I don't know, but you seem like it. You're stuttering like you just do when you're stressed now, you haven't stuttered to me like this since high school. I don't mind it, I'm just wondering, is everything okay?" She lays out.

"Yeah, a-all good. Are you good?"

"I'm fine! Also you keep tapping your foot like you do when you're anxious," she further observes. His foot immediately comes to a halt,

she can tell. "Why are you anxious? It's just us, you and me. What's eating you?"

He's quiet for a second, thinking. Then he breaks into a grin, smiling and shaking his head.

"Damn y-your observation s-skills..."

"Sorry, can't help it," she grins back. "But seriously, what's up?"

He gets up and starts clearing the table. She remains seated, waiting. She knows he'll tell her when he's ready. He takes his time putting the dishes in the sink, pensive, thinking. Then he turns and looks at her. Looks at her with so much love and adoration it puts a big smile on her face. A smile takes form over his features too. He seems to make his mind up. He steps forward.

"N-nance... I love you. I l-love everything about you. H-how brave you are, b-bravest in the world. How s-smart you are. T-the smartest in the world. How k-k-kind you are. How f-funny you are. How b-beautiful you are. I-inside a-and out," he begins, stopping himself to silently berate himself for stuttering and stumbling, she can tell. His words makes her heart swell. He's standing in front of her now. She takes one of his hands in hers, rubbing her thumb in gentle circles over the back of it to calm him, let him know it's okay. She wonders where he's going with all this. A passing thought that he's working up to a proposal invades her brain but she quickly shoves it aside. Not think like that. Just listen. "Y-you're p-perfect. It a-amazes me that you are t-the bravest, smartest, k-kindest, funniest, most beautiful person in the w-world, all at once. A-and that y-you being that s-still want... m-me." He stops again and looks her in the eye.

"You are, and I do," she softly says. He nods and readies himself to continue so she doesn't say anything else, she doesn't want to interrupt him. The intrusive thought of where he could be headed returns. Blood rushes to her head and she feels butterflies in her stomach.

"T-that's amazing to me. You're amazing. You s-saved Will, saved my mom... saved the whole w-world... I've been in l-love with you since we were 16. You make me a b-better person. You make me h-happy,

you make me s-stronger, b-braver. You support me. I w-want to always support you, I'll do anything for you. I c-can't imagine my l-life without you." He pauses and lets out a deep breath.

Okay now she's pretty sure of where he's heading. She quells her instinct to just shout yes and jump his bones here and now because he's obviously prepared his words and she knows how hard he must've worked on them, always struggling with his confidence in delivering speeches, but together they always get it. But this he's done alone.

"I w-want to do everything with you. I want t-to always be with you. Seriously you m-make every situation b-better just by b-being there and b-being you. I w-want to see the world with you. I'd say I'd want to g-give you the whole w-world but I know you'd do a better job of t-taking it yourself. B-but I'll do anything for you. I love you." He drops to a knee in front of her where she's still sitting on her chair and from his shirt pocket produces a simple but elegant ring. "S-so, N-nancy Wheeler would you marry me?"

She can't help but stare at the ring for a second. Then back to his eyes. He's looking up at her with an earnest but nervous look. Like he's somehow incredibly unsure of her answer and anxious for her reply.

"Of course!" She finally bursts out and throws herself at him, tackling him to the kitchen floor. He somehow manages to catch her without dropping the ring and holds her close on top of him while she grabs his face and plants a big kiss on his lips. He lets out a deep breath she didn't realize he'd been holding and smiles up at her. She beams down at him.

"Really?" He asks.

"Of course you doofus, what did you think?!"

"I don't know!"

She plants about nine more kisses all over his face before he halts and moves his hand from her hip to grasp her hand and brings it up between their faces. She holds out her finger and he gently slides the



ring on it with his other hand. They both marvel at it for a second. Then she captures his lips again.

"I love you, I love you, I love you," she repeats to him. "Everything you said, Jonathan everything... same back to you. You're the bravest. The smartest, kindest, funniest best person I know and you make everything better and I never want to be apart from you. I love you I love you," she giddily gets out, so amped to get her thoughts and feelings out after refraining from saying anything before since she didn't want to interrupt him.

"I love you," he responds and kisses her again.

She grins down at him, she can't stop smiling from ear to ear. His change in demeanor is so clear, the nerves, the stutter has disappeared again. So this is what he's been anxious about all week. Suddenly she's very aware of something.

"I can't believe you proposed to me when I wasn't even wearing pants!" She exclaims. He chuckles.

"Well I wasn't going to, I was going to do it tonight but then this relentless investigative reporter got me with her astute observations and I couldn't keep it in any longer!"

"Oops," she grins. "I'm glad you did, now that I'm engaged to you I feel like I couldn't have taken another second being not-engaged to you!"

"Me either," he grins and pecks her lips again. Before turning serious. "Sorry it wasn't... eloquent, I wanted to do it better, but I just got nervous and..."

"Hey, it was great. It was eloquent. It was beautiful. Perfect," she tells him.

"I don't know..."

"It's not how you say it. It's what you say. But for the record you said it well too. Because it was straight from the heart. I knew."

"It was."

"I love you so much," she tells him. She can't stop saying it.

"I love you," he responds. "We're still on the floor," he then notes with a chuckle.

"Oh, right," she laughs and gets up off of him before giving him a hand to get up. Not just any hand, the hand now adorned with a ring that promises to seal and confirm what she's known for years now. That she belongs with Jonathan. Forever. "Hey that walk you you mentioned before," she continues. "I don't really feel like it anymore. I can think of another activity..."

He takes one look at her. With a glimmer in his eye he picks her up and carries her off to their bedroom. She giggles into his neck as she holds on to him. She's had pancakes. Now Jonathan is all she needs.